

# JUSTIN KLINT

FIVE PAINTINGS FROM THE COLLECTION OF FERDINAND AND ADELE BLOCH-BAUER

LOS ANGELES COUNTY MUSEUM OF ART



APRIL 4 - JUNE 30, 2006



# VIENNA

## BEFORE

## WORLD

## WAR

## ONE

In the early years of the twentieth century, Vienna, the capital of the multinational Habsburg Empire, was a thriving metropolis enjoying what Austrians called "the last sparkle of the imperial age," while also leading the way into the future in every area of

art and culture. It was a city with one of the world's most vigorous music and theater scenes, a leading university, and thriving literary coffeehouses. Composers Gustav Mahler and Arnold Schoenberg, philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, authors Arthur Schnitzler and Hugo von Hofmannsthal, and psychologist Sigmund Freud were among the many Viennese residents who were extending the boundaries of art, thought, and the human psyche.

■ The visual arts of the time took part in an international movement of cultural renewal, known in England as the Arts and Crafts movement, in France as Art Nouveau, and in Germany and Austria as Jugendstil (Youth Style). This graceful new style was seen everywhere in Vienna, notably in the subway stations of architect Otto Wagner and the spare geometric buildings of Adolf Loos.

■ Modern artists throughout Europe were breaking away from conservative official art associations to form independent artists' collectives, or "secessions." The Vienna Secession, of which Klimt was a prominent member, consisted of a relatively small and generally like-minded group of artists and was closely tied to the decorative arts.



## GUSTAV KLIMT

Gustav Klimt was born in 1862 into an artistic Viennese family and received his education at Vienna's School of Fine Arts. He began his career with a commission to decorate the ceiling of the grand staircase at the Burg Theater, among the most prominent Viennese buildings and the most important venue for high society. His murals for the theater combined a variety of historical references, including naturalistic portraits of the city's most prominent citizens, and brought him awards and great prominence. A series of allegorical paintings he subsequently created for the University of Vienna, however—radical treatments of themes such as "Philosophy," "Jurisprudence," and "Medicine"—provoked scorn and ridicule.

Klimt turned his energies to the Vienna Secession, of which he had been a founding member. His Secessionist style departed from his earlier traditional naturalism and was based on the sinuous linearity of Jugendstil. He soon became known as the foremost portraitist of Vienna's new upper class, primarily its female members. He depicted the wives and daughters of these wealthy families as splendid icons enfolded in luxuriant patterns. This development reached spectacular intensity in a handful of rare paintings in his "gold style." These

portraits were so labor-intensive that he averaged only one per year after 1900. Each portrait required many sketches (several hundred in the case of **Adele Bloch-Bauer I**, on which he worked from 1904 to 1907).

In contrast to these elegant renderings of the socially prominent, he also painted landscapes, devoid of any human presence, that evoked the mystery and richness of nature.

Klimt died of a stroke in Vienna in 1918, leaving numerous paintings unfinished.



Gustav Klimt  
**Adele Bloch-Bauer I**, 1907  
Oil, silver, and gold on canvas  
55 1/8 x 55 1/8 in. (140 x 140 cm)  
Estate of Ferdinand Bloch-Bauer

GUSTAV KLIMT



## THE PORTRAITS OF ADELE BLOCH-BAUER

As the leading exponent of Viennese Jugendstil in painting, Klimt's most memorable works included his dazzling portraits of Vienna's leading society ladies, many of whom were Jewish. One of the best known of these is his magnificent 1907 painting, **Adele Bloch-Bauer I**, portraying the wife of the industrialist Ferdinand Bloch-Bauer (the aunt of Maria Altmann).

Foremost among the rare "gold style" works, the painting captures its elegant and intelligent subject as the ideal of feminine beauty. The figure dissolves into sumptuous patterning reminiscent of the Byzantine mosaics at Ravenna, Italy, portraying the Empress Theodora, which Klimt had visited in 1903. Klimt's fine craftsmanship in this work is evident in his varied uses of real gold: as a diffuse background luster reminiscent of Japanese lacquer, as the fabric of a flowing gown, and as a pattern punctuated with Egyptian god's-eye motifs. In contrast with this rich decorative treatment, Adele's face stands out as an extraordinarily modern psychological portrayal, while her hands are arranged gracefully to conceal a deformed finger. Self-assured yet introspective, she comports herself as a woman of privilege devoted to the world of the intellect.



(above)  
Gustav Klimt  
**Adele Bloch-Bauer II**, 1912  
Oil on canvas  
74 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 47 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in.  
(190 x 120 cm)  
Estate of Ferdinand  
Bloch-Bauer

(right)  
Adele Bloch-Bauer



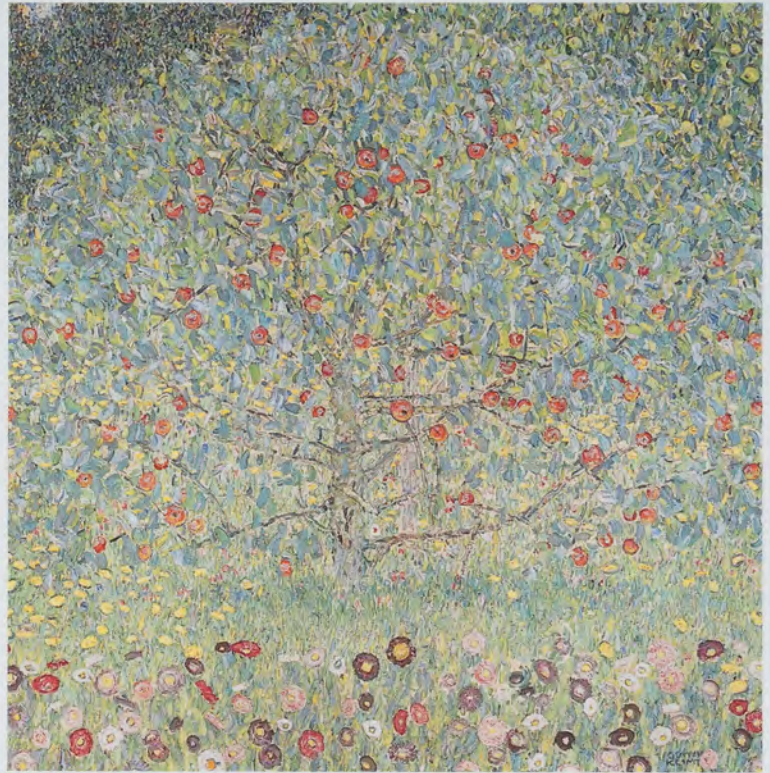


Transcending the customary role of women at the time, Adele hosted a salon, a regular social gatherings of artists, writers, musicians, and progressive politicians who discussed the issues of the day.

Adele Bloch-Bauer was the only woman whose portrait was painted twice by Klimt. In **Adele Bloch-Bauer II** the artist abandoned the iconic ambience and gold decoration of the first portrait in favor of a more modern approach to color. The vivid colors are applied spontaneously, yet with a strong compositional sense. An Asian motif can be seen in the upper background.

## THE LANDSCAPES

Beginning in 1900 Klimt spent most summers on Lake Atter in the Austrian Alps, where he painted directly from nature. His delicate, mostly square-format canvases captured his observations of the tranquil countryside, untouched by any human presence. In these paradoxically introspective compositions Klimt captured the blossoming beauty of gardens, flowers, and fruit trees in mosaic patternings of color and light. Their diffuse "impressionist" quality conveys a sense of timeless calm. The dense brushstrokes create curtains of color, as in **Apple Tree I**, encouraging the viewer to become lost in the atmosphere of the painting.



Gustav Klimt  
**Apple Tree I**, 1911 or 1912  
Oil on canvas  
42<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 43<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in. (109 x 110 cm)  
Estate of Ferdinand Bloch-Bauer



Klimt painted his landscapes using telescopes and opera glasses, and his elimination of distance is evident in works such as **Beech Woods** and **Apple Tree I**. These are landscapes entirely lacking in sky, clouds, or stars, with no reference to time or human beings. In **Houses in Unterach on Lake Atter** Klimt includes lodges along the shoreline set against the surface of the water, with its reflections and refractions of light and color.

## THE RETURN OF THE BLOCH-BAUER PAINTINGS TO LOS ANGELES

Adele and Ferdinand Bloch-Bauer—the aunt and uncle of Maria Altmann—lived in an urban Viennese palace filled with cultural treasures: exquisite furniture, a world-renowned porcelain collection, and paintings by Gustav Klimt as well as other artists. In 1923 Adele drafted her will, in which she stated that her husband would be her heir, but that after Ferdinand's death the Klimt paintings would go to the Austrian Gallery. Adele Bloch-Bauer died of meningitis in 1925 at the age of 43, and at that time all of the artworks remained in their Viennese home.



Gustav Klimt  
**Beech Woods  
(Birch Woods)**,  
1903  
Oil on canvas  
43 1/4 x 43 1/4 in.  
(110 x 110 cm)  
Estate of Ferdinand  
Bloch-Bauer



Gustav Klimt  
**Houses in  
Unterach on Lake  
Atter**, 1916  
Oil on canvas  
43 1/4 x 43 1/4 in.  
(110 x 110 cm)  
Estate of  
Ferdinand  
Bloch-Bauer



When Germany annexed Austria in March 1938, Ferdinand Bloch-Bauer, a Jew, fled Austria without the Klimt paintings. The new Nazi government saddled him with a punitive tax bill and engaged a Nazi trustee, Dr. Erich Führer, to sell his property. Three of the Klimt paintings went to the Austrian Gallery, and the others were sold elsewhere. After the war such transactions were deemed void, and the artworks were subject to restitution proceedings.

Ferdinand Bloch-Bauer spent most of the war in Switzerland and died in November 1945. When writing his last will he knew that many Austrians had supported Hitler and did not want the Klimt paintings to go to the Austrian Gallery. He therefore left his property to his niece, Maria Altmann, and two of her siblings.

Maria Altmann and the other heirs emigrated to North America. While they managed to export many works from the Bloch-Bauer collection, the Klimt paintings remained in Vienna. Austrian authorities ruled that the paintings belonged to the Austrian Gallery, basing their decision on Adele Bloch-Bauer's 1923 will.

Until the late 1990s the Bloch-Bauer heirs believed that there was little that they could do to recover the lost patrimony. In 1998 Austria passed a law that opened archives and facilitated restitution claims,

and Maria Altmann learned more about the fate of the Bloch-Bauer Klimts. She engaged an attorney, E. Randol Schoenberg (himself from a prominent Viennese Jewish family), to recover the paintings. The case went to the U.S. Supreme Court, which ruled in June 2004 that the heirs could sue the state of Austria in a U.S. court. Not wanting a lengthy legal process with appeals, Schoenberg, representing the 89-year-old Maria Altmann, entered into legally binding arbitration with the Austrian authorities.

In January 2006 an Austrian panel issued its verdict: of the six paintings in question, five belonged to the heirs. A decision about the remaining painting would come at a later date. Maria Altmann and the heirs could reclaim a part of their family's history. Just as life has taken her from Vienna to Los Angeles, so too have the paintings followed this path.

### **Special Event May 7**

Lectures and conversation with scholars and special guests, including Maria Altmann, E. Randol Schoenberg, and Jonathan Petropoulos.

### **Film Screenings**

April–June, Brown Auditorium

**Klimt: Adele's Last Will**, 2006; 52 minutes; director, Michel Vuillermet; producer, Dissidents/Laurence Uebersfeld.

For further information please visit [www.lacma.org](http://www.lacma.org) or call 323-857-6564.



are extremely grateful that the heirs of Ferdinand Bloch-Bauer have allowed the Los Angeles County Museum of Art the historic opportunity of sharing these paintings with an American public. Los Angeles was a favored destination of many exiles and émigrés fleeing Nazi Europe, so it is a particular honor to welcome the

paintings to this city, after arbitration returned them to the heirs of Ferdinand Bloch-Bauer (all of whom found refuge in North America). Without the assistance of E. Randol Schoenberg this presentation would not have been possible. We owe special thanks to Steven Thomas and Jonathan Petropoulos for their efforts on behalf of this project. At LACMA the cooperation of a team of experienced colleagues working against impossibly short deadlines has made this showing possible. Particular thanks are due to CEO and Wallis Annenberg Director Michael Govan, President Melody Kanschat, and Timothy Benson, Thomas Frick, Joe Fronek, Fred Goldstein, Laura Hardy, Amy McFarland, Renee Montgomery, Virginia Rasmussen, and Christine Vigiletti.

Stephanie Barron

Senior Curator of Modern Art

Los Angeles County Museum of Art

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